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ABSTRACT

This paper describes partnerships created by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) that were designed to facilitate school improvement through collaborative action research. After analysis of these partnership experiences, several recommendations were developed for creating and sustaining effective partnerships between research organizations and schools or districts. McREL selected seven partner sites, one from each state in the region McREL serves, to represent various geographic locations and student populations. As the work of these projects progressed, wide variance became evident in the stability of the partnerships, and only four were maintained for 3 years as initially planned. After documenting and analyzing the development and outcomes of the partnerships, five factors were identified that influenced the sustainability and effectiveness of the partnerships: (1) the political and cultural context of the school districts influenced multiple facets of the partnership ; (2) partners' motivation to engage in the partnership was increased as they saw that their efforts made a difference; (3) establishing clear goals kept the partnership on course; (4) partnerships were strengthened by partners' different yet complementary resources and skills; and (5) committed leadership at various levels was critical. The implications of these findings for the development of future partnerships with school districts are discussed. (Contains 24 references.) (SLD)

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SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS: PARTNERS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS: PARTNERS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Submitted to

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education

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INTRODUCTION

After several hours of driving on narrow, twisting country highways, the research consultant arrived at the school district office in the remote, rural town. She was anxious to report her latest analysis of data derived from her research project with the school. But when she arrived in the crowded meeting room, she sensed from the stillness that something was wrong — something had happened since she last visited the isolated district several weeks earlier.

Within minutes of sitting down at the meeting table, her suspicions were confirmed. The district's "second-in-command" stood up and explained that in light of the superintendent's recent resignation — the latest in a long string of such departures — he was rethinking the partnership with the researcher's organization. In fact, he felt it was best that they discontinue the partnership, two years into what had been planned to be a four-year study. He didn't see where the work was going and could not identify a reason to continue.

The consultant looked at the research report she had painstakingly crafted for the district. It now seemed as if all the effort she had put into analyzing the data and writing the report — not to mention the past two years of working and countless trips to the district — might be wasted.

This scenario — based on an amalgam of our experiences in working with schools and districts — illustrates the complexity and unpredictability of partnering with such organizations. Partnerships with schools can be difficult to establish and maintain because they are influenced by many factors — from individual interests to changes in leadership.

In the current political climate, educators are bombarded with pressures to change and often turn to partnerships with outside agents to undertake those changes. At the same time, outside agencies, such as research organizations, are realizing that to influence change in education, they need to work directly with schools and teachers. Such collaborations might seem like a simple arrangement — a mere matter of coming to an agreement about a scope of work, shaking hands on it, and getting down to business. In practice, however, creating successful partnerships can be a challenging task.

A number of writers (e.g., Berliner, 1997; McCullum, 2000) have identified key principles for creating effective partnerships including the need for mutual goals, effective communication, trusting relationships, adaptive leadership, and assessment of progress. In our experiences with school districts, we encountered additional factors that affected the stability and effectiveness of our partnerships. These factors involve the unique political pressures, work cultures, and motivations found within schools and districts, which collectively influence whether partnerships with schools roll smoothly down the tracks or result in a collaborative train wreck.

In this chapter, we describe partnerships created by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) that were designed to facilitate school improvement through collaborative

action research. After a careful analysis of these experiences, we have developed several recommendations for creating and sustaining effective partnerships between research organizations and schools or districts.

Background

McREL is one of 10 regional education laboratories (RELs) funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The purpose of the RELs is "to promote knowledge-based school improvement to help all students meet high standards" by conducting and disseminating research on education in the nation's K–12 schools (Spencer & Stonehill, 1999, p. iii). To carry out this mission, RELs are expected to work closely with state and local educators in using research to foster education reform.

In keeping with this expectation, McREL launched an initiative in 1997 to create collaborative research partnerships with school districts in the seven states it serves. The purpose of these partnerships was to engage in collaborative action research projects that promote education reform. The projects' goals were (1) to build the capacity of district and school staff to use data and action research methods to identify areas in need of improvement and (2) to design and implement interventions to address those needs.

McREL selected seven partner sites, one from each state in the region McREL serves, to represent various geographic locations (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural) and student populations (i.e., African American, American Indian, Anglo, and Hispanic). In keeping with McREL's federal mission to serve disadvantaged populations, most of these sites were in low-income communities. Table 1 lists the research partners using assigned pseudonyms.

Table 1
McREL Research Partners

School District	Demographic Profile		
	Location	Income	Student Population
Adams	Urban	Low	African American
Jackson	Suburban	Low - Middle	Non-minority
Jefferson	Rural – frontier	Low - Middle	Non-minority
Madison	Rural – isolated	Low	Latino, Immigrant
Monroe	Rural – reservation	Low	Native American
Quincy	Urban	Low	African American
Washington	Suburban	Middle	Non-minority

After identifying partners, we created a design team consisting of McREL researchers, district staff (e.g., administrators, curriculum coordinators, school psychologists), principals, and teachers. Together, the design team selected a research problem, developed a research project, collected and analyzed data, and reported the results to district staff. The focus of each project varied according to local needs as well as McREL researchers' areas of expertise. For example, one team examined the alignment of the district's curriculum, instruction, and assessment; another assessed school climate in the district; and yet another studied the extent to which teachers were using learner-centered practices.

McREL's principle role in these partnerships was to facilitate the research projects and help district partners implement changes in policies, programs, or practices. Throughout the partnerships, we guided district staff in designing research questions and data collection methods, provided technical assistance in various areas, and helped local staff make decisions based on research findings. Local educators, meanwhile, provided input into all aspects of the research process, carried out data collection, and made relevant recommendations for change to district and school officials.

Methods

As the work of the research partnerships progressed, McREL researchers developed case studies and reports, using informal interviews, focus groups, and observations of team meetings. These reports documented background information about the partner sites, the process of planning the research project, collaborative research activities, technical assistance provided to the districts, effects of changes implemented by the districts, and evidence of district capacity building (Lauer, Apthorp, Vangsnes, Schieve, & Van Buhler, 1999). It is important to note that the focus of these documents — and our research efforts — was school improvement, not building partnerships.

However, as this work unfolded, we began to see wide variance in the stability of our partnerships. Of the seven partnerships we initiated, only four partnerships were maintained for three years as initially planned — Jackson, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. The Adams partnership did not proceed beyond early negotiation stages, the Quincy partnership ended before data collection could begin, and McREL's partnership with Washington ended after one year of research. These varying degrees of success in the partnerships prompted us to go back and examine our efforts to form partnerships and to examine why some collaborations were more successful than others.

McREL's first analysis led us to conclude that there are several types of education partnerships — from simple exchanges of services to the creation of new entities where there is a mutual exchange of benefits (Barnett, Hall, Berg & Camarena, 1999). According to this analysis, partnerships are dynamic — what may begin as a simple arrangement can evolve into a much more complex relationship. The issues and concerns that partners need to consider will vary depending on the type and purpose of the of the partnership. In this chapter, we continue the analysis by examining why some of our partnerships were more successful than others — that is, why some evolved into more integrated, sustained efforts and others did not. To develop the findings described in the following section, we performed a content analysis of the case studies, notes from meetings with our partner sites, and a report that described influences on the early establishment of the partnerships (McREL, 1999).

Findings

After documenting and analyzing the development and outcomes of the partnerships during the duration of our collaborative research work, we identified five factors that influenced the sustainability and effectiveness of the partnerships:

1. The political and cultural contexts of school districts influenced multiple facets of the partnerships, including the collaboration process, the work focus, and the length of the partnership.

2. Partners' motivation to engage in the partnership increased when they saw that their efforts made a difference, when they had ownership of the project work, and when the focus of the effort aligned with their interests.

3. Establishing clear goals kept the partnerships on course, sustained commitment, and expedited the work.

4. Partnerships were strengthened by partners' different yet complementary resources and skills.

5. Committed leadership at various levels within both organizations was critical to maintaining the partnerships and facilitating the work.

In the following sections, we support these findings using examples from the literature and our documentation of the partnerships. We conclude with comments about the implications of these factors for future partnerships. Readers will no doubt notice some overlap between these five sections. This is not surprising given that the factors can, at times, influence one another. For example, strong *leadership* can help to ensure that sufficient *resources* are committed to the project. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity, we present these factors as separate concerns.

Understanding Politics and Culture

Politics. A fish most likely pays little attention to the water in which it swims until it finds itself on the shore. So, too, organizations may pay little attention to their own surroundings — or the political and cultural contexts in which they operate — until they attempt to form a partnership with another organization. The partnership forces them to operate, at least in part, within another organization's political and culture surroundings and can, indeed, leave them feeling like a fish out of water.

To avoid such discomfort and possible missteps, organizations partnering with school districts need to be aware of the both the political pressures acting on them and the cultures in which they exist. At the same time, partnering organizations should be aware of their own organizational cultures, which they may take for granted. In this section, we examine the ways in which different political and cultural contexts of the school districts and of McREL influenced our partnerships.

A growing number of districts are operating under systems of high-stakes accountability. In nearly every state in the nation, input-based accreditation systems are giving way to results-oriented accountability (Fuhrman, 1999). That is, instead of monitoring schools' compliance process regulations (e.g., number of school days), states are beginning to focus more on student outcomes, (e.g., scores on statewide assessments) and attaching high stakes to these results. As a consequence, educators are becoming more focused on student performance. In many districts, this concern can be all consuming.

It is only natural that before entering into a partnership, participants ask themselves, "What's in it for me?" In today's political context, the most compelling response from districts and schools may be that the collaboration will help them address accountability concerns. Indeed, in our partnership with Jackson, the research project (examining how closely the district's curriculum was aligned to its districtwide assessment) served, in part, to help the district address state requirements. By analyzing whether students were being given the opportunity to learn what was included on the district assessment, district staff hoped to learn what curriculum changes were needed to improve student test scores. Thus, the project was closely aligned with district officials' most pressing concerns and was not viewed as an "add-on." It is likely no coincidence that officials supported this project financially and that it was sustained and productive. In short, it was in step with the new realities of schooling under a system of standards-based accountability.

In contrast, if outside organizations do not take into account the political contexts of districts, partnership progress can be stymied. In Madison, some district officials were concerned with standards-based curriculum changes, while others were focused more on the achievement gap between Anglo and minority students. The design team chose to focus on the latter because that group was more vocal. However, the standards-based group had more power in the district, and eventually changed the direction of the work. In this case, we pursued a line of work that did not reach fruition because it did not reflect the priorities of the most influential people in the district.

Culture. In general, school systems have quite different cultures than do many workplaces. These differences profoundly affect how the adults in schools approach their work and work together — and thus approach partnerships with outside organizations. Indeed, we found that these unique aspects of school cultures are much more than just an academic consideration; they often impact the success of partnerships — sometimes for the worse. As a result, it is important to understand school cultures and how they may differ from one's own organizational culture before entering into an educational partnership.

A stroll through the hallways of a typical school reveals an important characteristic of school culture — teachers typically work inside separate classrooms, behind closed doors, cut off from one another. They may interact in the faculty lounge, but their conversations are rarely of a professional nature. In his sociological study of schools, Lortie (1975) observes that teachers "work largely alone" (p. 76). Although they may share ideas, the sharing is usually limited to picking up a few "tricks of the trade," as opposed to larger theories of instruction (p. 77). More recent writers, including Johnson (1990) and Hargreaves (1994), make similar observations about today's schools — they are fragmented organizations where little professional collaboration occurs.

Due to this isolation and fragmentation, partner organizations may find themselves struggling to work with people who have little experience, or even desire, to work with one another. We found that our efforts were hampered by local staff members' lack of experience in working collaboratively. In some of our sites, teachers were divided into camps and there were feelings of mistrust and unresolved conflicts among staff members. In other districts, gulfs existed between teachers who taught at different schools. For example, teachers from the various towns in Jefferson were unable to come together to create a unified research project. Instead, teachers from each town pursued their own projects independent of one another, which dispersed the design team's energies. During the second year of the project, McREL contracted with a local consultant who was familiar with teachers in all three towns. Through networking, the consultant helped us pull the team together to focus on a shared project during.

A key cultural gap that also existed between McREL and its partners was that school staff were inclined to feel that researchers lacked experience in the "real world" of K–12 classrooms. We were able to bridge this gap through the use of our field service liaisons and local consultants who acted as what might be called boundary spanners. According to Baker (1994), these sorts of "linking or bridging positions" are critical to the success of collaborations such as ours (p. 29). McREL's field service providers and consultants were able to build relationships with district partners due to the close connection that RELs have with field-based issues and concerns in education, a connection that is not usually present between researchers and the world of practice (Huberman, 1999).

The political and cultural contexts of school districts influenced multiple aspects of each partnership, particularly the collaboration process but also the focus of work and how long the partnership was maintained. Without a deep understanding of the political pressures confronting schools or districts, partner organizations may fail to design collaborative work that is closely aligned with the school or district's most pressing needs. Similarly, if partners are unaware of the fragmented work culture in many K–12 communities, they may incorrectly assume that the school or district they are working with is a unified group.

Addressing Motivations

Without a doubt, partners often have different motivations for entering into a relationship. It is important to note, however, that *motivations* are not the same thing as *goals*. For example, teachers may enter into a partnership hoping to gain skills that will help "reach" their students; district administrators may endorse the collaboration in hopes of improving district reading scores; and researchers may view the relationship as a means of collecting data on the impact of a reading intervention program. In the end, though, all parties in the partnership must agree on the same goals — in this case, to implement and study a reading intervention program.

McREL, of course, had its reasons for creating the partnerships — namely, to fulfill our federal obligation to improve educational practices through research. However, because the partnership activities were conceived collaboratively among design team members, from the outset we experienced tension between our need to meet contractual obligations (i.e., developing deliverables and products for dissemination) and the need to address district concerns. At the same time, district staff were hardly united in their reasons for creating the partnership, as the following example from Quincy illustrates:

> Observations and interviews indicated a need and willingness to learn and to change, to work with McREL, and to support such an effort. However, among teachers, there was an interest in more staff development and less concern with turnover rates than among principals. The design team was having difficulty in reaching consensus about the focus of the research. (Lauer et al., 1999, p. 58).

School culture also influenced teachers' motivations to participate in the partnership. As Lortie (1975) observes, teachers tend to be autonomous, especially those protected by tenure. Although some teachers flourish under this independence, use the independence as a license to not cooperate with administrators (Deal & Peterson,1999). The implications for organizations planning to partner with schools is clear: stakeholder buy-in is crucial. Although many of the teachers in our partnerships were eager to provide input and take part in the work, in some cases members had been assigned to the design team group by their supervisors — and did not necessarily want to be there. Through passive resistance, they became what Deal and Peterson call "deadwood" (p. 122), not participating in the work.

Obviously, teacher autonomy — and the resistance sometimes associated with it — can be a source of frustration when partnering with schools or districts. Partners need to address this resistance head-on by aligning partnership efforts with their own motivations. Specifically, partners should be aware that because teachers traditionally have not been rewarded monetarily for their efforts (e.g., receiving pay increases for their success with students), many instead are motivated by emotional rewards, for example, knowing that they have reached students (Lortie, 1975). This means that teachers' primary allegiance is to the classroom, where they derive most of their job satisfaction. As a result, they tend to resent being pulled away from their students (Johnson, 1990). In short, although principals and other school leaders may be interested in broad, school improvement issues, teachers often are not. They may resent devoting time and energy to the efforts unless it is clear how those efforts will help them "reach" students.

As a result, a critical aspect of addressing teachers' motivations is the link to the classroom. All too often, however, action research projects in school districts tend to focus on adult activities and issues external to instruction (Calhoun & Glickman, 1993). In our experiences, we found that our partners were more motivated to engage in the collaborative research project when it had a clear potential to affect teachers in their daily practices. Although some of the goals were broad and the work was at the district level (e.g., alignment among standards, assessment, and curriculum), we emphasized the potential long-term impacts at the classroom level. Without connecting the goals of the partnership to teaching and learning, teachers are liable to become disengaged from the work.

For example, during the first year of our partnership with Jefferson, district design team members conducted individual action research projects on the relationship of various school and classroom practices to student learning, such as strategies to improve student writing.

> Action research projects gave teachers opportunities to systematically define a problem, collect data to describe the problem and inform possible solutions, talk with colleagues about their practices, and collaborate with colleagues by sharing skills and resources (e.g., data organization and presentation). (Lauer et al., 1999, p. 28)

This work was clearly connected to the classroom, and teachers showed a high level of enthusiasm. In contrast, the questions that the Madison design team members originally wanted to investigate were broader and the connection to student learning was not obvious, for example, how to find a common district focus for reform efforts and how to accommodate diverse views in designing an improvement strategy. It was only after we encouraged the design team to look at teachers' classroom practices that members began to show a greater buy-in to the research partnership.

Another influence on educator motivation is the stress and demands of the job can cause teachers to "burn out," and thus they lack energy to engage in partnership efforts in a meaningful way. The major symptom of burnout among educators, according to Evans (1996), is a feeling of inconsequentiality — that nothing they do really matters. Such attitudes can make it difficult to engage educators in partnership activities. However, when they see evidence that their efforts have made a difference, their motivation to sustain the partnership increases. This sense of efficacy, whether in affecting policy or procedures, enhancing professional skills, or increasing student achievement, is an important motivator for remaining committed to a partnership. For example, in Jackson, educators were able to immediately put to use results of the research project — a study examining the extent to which the district's curriculum was aligned to its tests. As a result, researchers were able to build buy-in early on among staff members. On the other hand, Madison's project on the assessment of teachers' classroom practices did not produce immediate visible changes in instruction. After 18 months, Madison educators began to question the value of the research partnership.

It is important to recognize that partners' motivations to engage in the work are not static — they can fluctuate over time in response to changes in the collaborative work. In Washington, for example, the design team, comprised mainly of district and building administrators, set out to examine the district's use of data in decision making. One key aspect of this research, was that it allowed the district to gain access to certain kinds of data which had previously been unavailable. Once these data were collected, district officials became noticeably less interested in the partnership. Their immediate needs had been met, and thus, their motivation to partner had diminished. Similarly, in Jefferson, when the research project changed from conducting individual studies to designing a single project related to district goals, some teachers became less active. The partnership no longer appealed to their interests, and therefore their motivation to contribute time and effort to the work diminished. In Jackson, however, the opposite was true. We were able to change the focus of the research project to make the work more relevant and meaningful for teachers. Specifically, the project's focus shifted from districtwide curriculum alignment to day-to-day classroom practices, and interactions between teachers and students (Lauer et al., 1999).

Allowing partners to feel a sense of ownership of the work was a key to sustaining the partnership. For example, the Monroe design team members demonstrated a strong sense of ownership — and independence from McREL — during the research process. As the project progressed, district staff members began to recognize the importance of the data they were gathering — so much so that they decided to meet on their own to get the design team's second research project underway. Morever, they requested that data and tools from the project be made available to them even after the work of the partnership was completed (Lauer et al., 1999). In Monroe's case, design team members had the opportunity to provide input, which helped them feel a sense of

ownership for the work. Because members believed that their work was meaningful, they actively engaged in carrying it out. The opportunity to provide input into something important gave members, especially teachers, the motivation to partner.

In summary, partners will have different motivations for engaging in collaborative work. Based on our experiences in partnering with school districts, we learned that we must address all of these various motivations. This means that it is important for partners to express their reasons for engaging in the partnership, and for each partner to continually be aware of motivations and to ensure that they are being addressed throughout the course of the collaboration.

Establishing Clear Goals

Organizations partner because they realize that they cannot reach their goals by themselves. As Sparks (2000) comments, "the most critical attribute of strong educational partnerships is a compelling, stretching purpose that motivates and directs the work of the partners" (p. 3). In this section, we describe the influence of goals on our partnerships. Although McREL had established its own overarching purpose for the research partnerships, each individual partnership needed to establish its own goals. Although goal setting might seem like a simple task, the design teams often found it difficult to stake out enough common ground to identify mutual goals.

In those cases where the teams could not delineate goals and plans early on, the partnerships floundered. For example, in Quincy, district officials were interested in examining the factors that contributed to students in one high-poverty elementary school posting higher levels of achievement than other, similar schools. In short, they wanted to know what the principal at the school "was doing right and what the other principals were doing wrong" (McREL, 1999, p. 8). However, during private discussions with school staff members, they suggested that the district was supporting the leadership at the higher performing school while unwittingly undermining leadership at other schools. As a result, some members of the partnership thought that the project should examine all of the factors contributing to effective leadership in the high-performing school. However, other members of the team, namely district leaders, did not want to examine the district's role in supporting or hampering school leadership. Without clear agreement about the scope and focus, the research project could not move forward (McREL, 1999). Eventually, the entire project was abandoned.

On the other hand, when there was a clear vision about the goals of the district and the research work, design team members were more committed to the partnership, which in turn expedited the progress of the partnership (McREL, 1999). For example, Jackson design team members quickly arrived at a focus for the research project, and their project progressed at a faster rate than did those at the other sites.

Indeed, the most successful partnerships were those with a clearly identified problem that required a solution or intervention. People were motivated by a sense of direction and purpose, especially when they believed that with McREL's help they could realize their goals. We often worked with design teams to see the "overall picture" and how the pieces fit together, as the following example from Madison illustrates:

> The district was implementing many reforms but without a common theme or direction. The district, through the efforts of the Design team, was unified in the adoption of a learner-centered framework for their reform efforts. (Lauer et al., 1999, p. 39)

An important caveat is in order here. Too often, a partnership's stated goals may not be the same as what partners perceive to be the partnership's goals. And when there is a difference between stated and perceived goals, problems can occur (Baker, 1994). For example, in one of the districts, a member of the design team perceived that one goal of the partnership was to collect data in relation to another district project. Since this purpose was not articulated, the way in which data were collected for the partnership project did not allow them to be used for the other project. As a result, for a while this member was angry and disillusioned with the work of the partnership and communicated that to the rest of the design team.

An additional caveat — in setting goals, partners must avoid the tendency to bite off more than they can chew. Indeed, in many of our partnerships, the partners established goals that were unreasonable for the time allotted. Moreover, the teams failed to develop indicators by which to measure progress. In these cases, the lack of reasonable goals and indicators began to affect the partnerships as they entered their third year of work. The result was an inability of the partnerships to document their successes and, for some individuals, frustration with the project. For example, in Madison, the failure to set goals and indicators beyond the first year created frustration in the second and third years about the purpose of the partnership and what it had achieved.

Midway through our collaborative research efforts we realized the importance of not only setting, but also articulating clear goals for the partnership. We designed logic models to clarify the link between design team activities and student learning, such as the graphic shown in Figure 1. We shared the logic models with the design team and asked for their comments and input. This visual picture clarified where the partnership was going and created the opportunity for design team members to chart progress and note successes.

Drafting clear goals affects how quickly a partnership becomes established and begins its work agenda. Goals are also necessary to provide markers for success so that those involved in the partnership can point to progress. Without a mutual understanding of the purpose and work of the partnership, frustration can jeopardize effectiveness. People can lose interest and their sense of commitment. Worse, participants can become disappointed with the partnering organization, which can affect future relationships. When partners are explicit about partnership goals and they revisit the goals at meetings, their commitment is sustained. As a result, the partnership is more likely to stay on course.

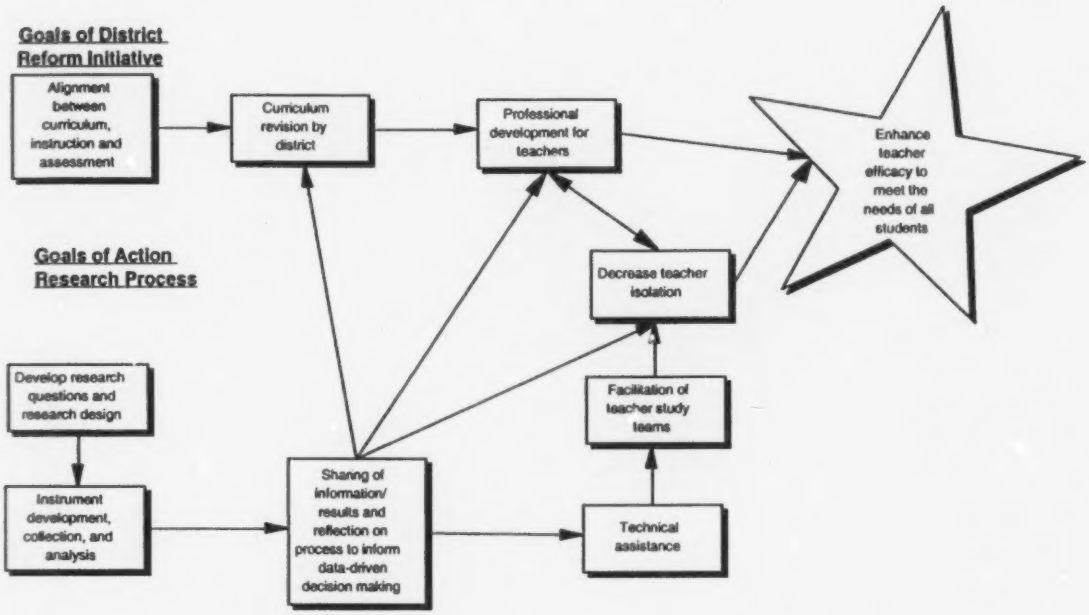
Goals of District Reform Initiative
Alignment between curriculum, instruction and assessment
Curriculum revision by district
Professional development for teachers
Enhance teacher efficacy to meet the needs of all students
Goals of Action Research Process
Decrease teacher isolation
Develop research questions and research design
Facilitation of teacher study teams
Instrument development, collection, and analysis
Sharing of information/ results and reflection on process to inform data-driven decision making
Technical assistance

Figure 1. Example of a logic model used for McREL research partnerships

Resources and Capacities of Partners

Resources. In general, McREL provided the lion's share of resources for the partnership efforts, including financial resources as well as varying levels of technical assistance such as workshops on learner-centered instructional practices and assistance in aligning curricula with the state assessment. This second type of resource — McREL's ability to provide technical assistance — motivated many district members to engage in the partnership. Partners consistently stated that working with McREL staff gave administrators and teachers more opportunities for growth and professional development, as noted in the following observations about Monroe:

> The district appeared to view the partnership as a support for their restructuring efforts. Decisions were made to involve McREL in outreach visits to the schools and to include McREL in the inservices. The Superintendent also became increasingly involved in Design team Meetings and encouraged McREL staff to bring . . . training to all faculty and administrators. (Lauer et al., 1999, p. 51)

Districts contributed to the partnerships primarily by providing staff time. For example, the Jackson school board allocated funds to support the project, and, in turn, requested quarterly progress reports. This official commitment to the project facilitated its progress and also signaled its importance to school staff. The design team submitted results from the collaborative research effort to school board members which prompted changes in the district's curriculum. In contrast, Quincy was a struggling district and resources were scarce from the outset. Schools were understaffed, making it difficult for teachers to participate in the partnership. In fact, teachers had to leave their classrooms unattended in order to attend design team meetings since substitute teachers were not

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available. As a result, this partnership floundered and eventually ended once threats of losing state accreditation diverted the district's attention away from the project (McREL, 1999).

Thus, financial commitment by both partners was essential to sustaining the partnerships. As one superintendent stated bluntly, there is no real partnership unless each organization brings its checkbook. Unless both partners are financially committed to the partnership, they can easily withdraw from the collaboration without losing anything.

District capacities. Because the partnerships were formed to conduct collaborative research, district capacities to conduct such research were critical to the progress of the partnership. One stumbling block was that the design teams were often comprised of people who were not used to collaborating, such as teachers from different buildings, or teachers and administrators. As Sorenson (1998) notes about school-university collaborations, the imposition of a collaborative structure is often not sufficient in partnerships; participants need to learn the skills of collaboration and teamwork. We found that we had to devote a considerable amount of time and energy during group meetings at each site to team-building activities including conflict resolution training and building trust. Although this might appear tangential to the "real work" of the partnership, spending time up front to encourage better cooperation and teamwork was well worth the effort as the following excerpt indicates:

> An important element that emerged from the meeting was the value of the team-building activities. Although the local participants knew each other as employees of the same school district, they had not interacted as team members, nor had they interacted with the McREL participants. The team building thus established how the members would work together in designing and conducting the action research. Members were passionate in expressing the need for ground rules, and safety of expression was a particular concern. (Monroe meeting notes, November 13, 1997)

One way around this problem was to use an existing group as the main partner group. For example, in one of our partnerships, the district designated an already existing curriculum team as the design team. The use of this district infrastructure for collaboration seemed to facilitate their research project, which was developed earlier than projects at the other sites. Another district used its school improvement teams to facilitate the partnership's work.

In their studies of schoolwide action research, Calhoun and Glickman (1993) found that school faculties' understanding of the research process is essential to the success of research projects. We found that this was particularly true in districts where data collection was synonymous with evaluation in the minds of staff. For example, a low level of research and school improvement capacity among staff in Madison might have contributed to their inability to readily identify a research question. As a result, the concerns they initially expressed could not be easily categorized nor translated into questions for which data could be collected. On the other hand, in Jackson, staff members were more familiar with data collection, since they were in a state and district where stringent data collection procedures were already in place. As a result, it was far easier to generate enthusiasm for collecting data and using it to guide school improvement activities.

To outside observers, it might seem that our partnerships were not very collaborative because McREL completed most of the technical aspects of the research. Although we often provided technical guidance and research expertise, school staff had an important role in providing "real-world" insights into the problems at hand. As a result, we developed new ways of thinking about issues and problems that we would not have developed on our own. This is similar to conclusions by John-Steiner, Weber, and Minnis (1998) in their study of collaborative inquiry by teachers and university researchers — that complementary experiences and training can be real assets in a collaboration.

For example, in the third year of the Monroe partnership, the design team conducted a study of instructional practices in relation to teachers' classroom structures- multiage or single grade. The district members of the design team designed the study and developed questions for a teacher survey. The McREL researcher used the design team's input to construct a final version of the survey. After data collection was completed, the McREL researcher analyzed the results and delivered a statistical report to the design team for interpretation. The design team then used the results to draft recommendations (e.g., for teacher staff development) which were distributed to Madison certified staff and school board members. Thus, the district designed the focus and content of the study and interpreted the results in light of local conditions. McREL provided the research expertise for instrument development and data analysis. Both partners learned about the relationships between classroom structure and instructional practices. Both contributed resources that were different but complementary.

In summary, financial and human resources are needed to support partnerships. In addition, partners' skills in collaboration and understanding of research greatly influence partnership progress. However, based on our experiences, the contributions of resources to an education partnership do not need to be the same in amount or kind. As John-Steiner, Weber, and Minnis (1998) noted, when partners combine complementary resources and capacities, they are able to achieve creative outcomes.

Committed Leadership

Leadership instability can influence both the initiation and maintenance of education partnerships. Growing political pressures and turf battles among school board members are largely blamed for the rapid turnover among district superintendents — as well as numerous vacancies among top positions in school districts (Heim, 1999). Similarly, many districts also are seeing an acute shortage of building-level leaders (Learner, 2000). High-stakes accountability systems are increasingly putting principals in the "hot seat," making fewer educators willing to take jobs that they view as having relatively low pay but high stress.

In this section, we discuss how these trends and other leadership issues influenced our work with districts. For example, almost immediately after initiating a partnership with Adams, a large urban district, the superintendent resigned unexpectedly. This led to a long transition period while the school board searched for a suitable replacement. During this period, it was impossible to move the partnership forward with interim leaders, since they wanted to wait and see what the new superintendent would do. Eventually, after a long period of limbo, the district hired a new superintendent, who decided to end the relationship.

According to Sagor (1997), sustaining a process of action research for education change requires the support of school leaders which sends the signal to staff that such work is valued. Similarly, we found in our partnerships that the ongoing presence of committed district leaders provided access to needed resources and staff and lent legitimacy to the research projects (McREL, 1999). In Jackson, for example, the superintendent monitored the design team's progress and required principals to participate in data collection. This level of interest increased the visibility of the project and encouraged participation by school staff. In contrast, the sporadic involvement of Jefferson district leaders in the research project hampered its progress.

Another influence of leadership was the emergence of district champions on the design teams, which demonstrated that leadership can occur at many levels in an education partnership. As Osguthorpe and Patterson (1998) note, such informal leaders are often just as, if not more, vital to the collaboration as formal leaders. This observation aligns with current literature on organizational leadership, which argues that organizations should abandon the "myth of the hero-leader" (Senge, 1999, p. 11), or the lone "gunslinger" who rides into town and saves the day. Change is, instead, more likely to occur when leadership responsibilities are shared among many people in the organization. Not only does this sort of broad leadership facilitate staff buy-in, it also ensures that change initiatives are less likely to falter when formal leaders depart or "the gunslinger leaves town" (McREL, 2000, p. 11).

We found that our collaborative research initiatives weathered changes in leadership when they had broad support, not only among formal leaders, but also among a school system's informal leaders as well. For example, in Monroe, both the superintendent and assistant superintendent — both of whom had actively promoted our partnership — left during the course of the collaborative work. Ordinarily, this might have spelled the end of the partnership. But it did not because a principal and a lower level leader, the district's school psychologist, championed the work of the design team, as described in the following excerpt:

> She [the psychologist] seems to be very eager (and even hungry) for a research atmosphere in the district. At the same time, she exhibits sincere concern for the needs of the students and wants research that will make a difference to them. (Monroe meeting notes, January 16, 1998)

Subsequently, she was instrumental in facilitating most of the design team activities. In another site, a veteran elementary teacher embraced the notion of inquiry into practice. Her attitude and enthusiasm helped generate and sustain the research activities of the partnership.

We, too, had our own leadership changes to contended with — after three years, only one of the original McREL researchers remained involved with the collaborative research initiative. New researchers were hired, trained, and assigned to districts as needed. In one site, the departure of the McREL staff member working with the district coincided with the district's own changes in leadership. The new district leader on the team used this as an opportunity to change the direction of the project significantly by casting doubt on the work we had accomplished. However, in cases where our work was already aligned with district needs and partner motivations and guided by clear goals and logic models, new researchers were able to take over where their predecessors had left off with relatively few disruptions. Once again, this supports the need for broad-based leadership. If the

partnership relies too much upon one individual in either organization to guide the project, it runs the risk of being abandoned if that individual leaves.

Without the commitment of school leaders, partnership efforts are destined to fail. If leaders are interested and involved in the project, they will marshal the necessary resources to ensure its success. However, it is important to bear in mind that leadership should not be construed simply as a single individual at the top of the organization, but rather as a collection of influential people in the school or district. By engaging this deeper level of informal leaders, partnership efforts will be more likely to continue even if formal leaders (e.g., principals and superintendents) leave the district or school.

CONCLUSIONS

The five findings offered in this chapter were developed after a careful analysis of our experiences in designing and maintaining research partnerships with school districts. We believe that they capture the complexity of school systems by collectively addressing the entire system — from individual motivations to external political pressures. We believe it is vitally important to consider each of these issues in a partnership because failing to consider any one element can lead to failure. For example, a partnership can be guided by committed, broad-based leadership, yet if the focus of the work fails to address the motivations of everyone involved in the effort, it will make little progress and have minimal impact. In this final section, we translate our findings into implications for future partnerships with school districts.

1. *Know your partners.* Organizations partnering with school districts need to understand the political pressures confronting school organizations so that they can design collaborative work that helps schools address critical issues. If they do not, school leaders will view the partnership as a distraction and will be more likely to abandon the work or offer few resources in support of the partnership. Similarly, partners need to be aware of the unique work culture within schools because this influences the extent to which people in the school organization engage in partnership activities and collaboration.

2. *Address the role partners' motivations play in the partnership and connect the work to the classroom.* Aligning partnership efforts with individual motivations is critical to facilitating and sustaining partnerships. This increases partners' engagement, buy-in, and sense of efficacy. In other words, we found that partners' valued the partnership when they could see how their efforts made a difference, especially when that difference linked to the classroom. Educators need to know that their investment in a partnership will directly or indirectly affect daily practices and student learning. It is important to understand and address partners' initial — and continuing — motivations for engaging in the partnership.

3. *Establish long-term goals with short-term indicators of progress.* Sustaining partnerships depends on the establishment of clear goals that are perceived in the same way by both organizations. For our partnerships, participants'

clear vision of the collaboration enhanced their motivations to begin working. To continue that effort, partners needed to realize that they were making progress and that results eventually would impact student learning. We recommend that partners establish goals early, assess participants' understanding of the goals and continually revisit the goals. Realistic indicators should be chosen and then used regularly to celebrate progress and to make mid-course adjustments.

4. *Use the complementary resources and capacities of each partner and build the ability of each partner to collaborate.* Partnerships need resources to function, and partners need appropriate capacities and skills to make the best use of these resources. We found that the effectiveness of the partnership did not hinge on whether the partners contributed an equal amount of resources. What mattered was that there was commitment to the collaboration. In addition, because collaboration is a capacity essential to most partnerships, it is important to devote time to examining partners' collaborative skills and to providing appropriate training if necessary.

5. *Identify and foster leaders.* Obviously, committed leadership is critical to securing resources for the partnership, maintaining the collaboration, and facilitating the work. But the key message here is that leadership of the project needs to lie with more than one or two individuals whose departure could imperil the partnership. Instead, leadership should be considered more broadly as a group of people who share responsibility for guiding and carrying out the work.

Following these recommendations is no guarantee that such research partnerships will succeed. Indeed, one of the key messages of this chapter is that unanticipated events are quite likely to occur when partnering with school districts. In other words, partners should expect the unexpected. Thus, we offer these recommendations not as a way to avoid problems, but rather as a means for ensuring that the partnership weathers unforseen events. The following scenario, a more positive amalgam of our experiences while conducting collaborative research with school districts, offers an illustration of partnership stability — even in the face of adverse circumstances.

The researcher dreaded what she might encounter when she arrived in the district office at the end of yet another long drive — this time, over snowy mountain roads. A week earlier, she learned that the superintendent resigned after a contentious battle with the school board, leaving the district in a state of turmoil. As a result, she was bracing herself for, at best, a long period of limbo in which it would be difficult to advance the work of the partnership toward its established goals, and, at worst, loss of administrative commitment and teacher buy-in, resulting in the eventual demise of the partnership. To make matters worse, the snow falling on the mountain roads had delayed her arrival, and she was running about 30 minutes late.

When she entered the meeting room, however, she was surprised to see that the team had started the meeting — a working session to analyze student

performance data — without her. An influential principal now seemed to be leading the meeting. The acting superintendent, the district's curriculum developer, was also seated at the table. As soon as the consultant sat down, the curriculum developer explained that several teachers who were working on the project had been talking about it after a recent district meeting, so he had come "to see what all the buzz was about." After learning more about the project from design team members, he, too, was excited about the project because it promised to yield information that could be immensely valuable for their accreditation review by the state.

At that point, one teacher explained, almost apologetically, that over the past few weeks, they had taken it upon themselves to conduct their own analysis of the data and had begun to draft a report for the school board. In addition, some other teachers said they wanted to work on the project as well. Was that okay? The consultant almost laughed. Yes, that was okay, she said. In fact, it was more than okay. It was great.

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